

Statement on Senate Confirmation of Robert M. Gates as Secretary of Defense

December 6, 2006

I am pleased the Senate has overwhelmingly voted to confirm Dr. Robert Gates as the next Secretary of Defense. In his confirmation hearing, Dr. Gates demonstrated he is an experienced, qualified, and thoughtful man who is well respected by members of both parties and is committed to winning the war on terror. Throughout his career, Dr. Gates has transformed the organizations he has led and

empowered them to successfully address complex issues. I am confident that his leadership and capabilities will help our country meet its current military challenges and prepare for emerging threats of the 21st century.

I thank Chairman Warner and Ranking Member Levin for leading dignified and constructive hearings, and I thank the Senate for moving quickly on this nomination.

The President's News Conference With Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom

December 7, 2006

President Bush. Thank you all. Please be seated. I just had a good visit with Prime Minister Tony Blair. I appreciate you coming back, Mr. Prime Minister. I always enjoy our discussions. And I appreciate your clear view that we are confronted with a struggle between moderation and extremism, and this is particularly evident in the broader Middle East.

I talked about my recent trip to Jordan, where I talked to Prime Minister Maliki. I briefed the Prime Minister on my visit with His Eminence, Mr. Hakim, one of the major political players in Iraq. We discussed the report I received yesterday from the Iraq Study Group, a report chaired by Secretary of State—former Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton. I told the Prime Minister I thought this was a very constructive report. I appreciated the fact that they laid out a series of recommendations, and they're worthy of serious study. I also updated the Prime Minister on the reviews that are being conducted by the Pentagon and the State Department and our National

Security Council. I talked to him about the consultations I'm having with the United States Congress.

We agree that victory in Iraq is important. It's important for the Iraqi people; it's important for the security of the United States and Great Britain; and it's important for the civilized world. We agree that an Iraq that can govern itself, defend itself, and sustain itself as an ally on the war on terror is a noble goal. The Prime Minister and I seek a wide range of opinions about how to go forward in Iraq, and I appreciate your opinions and your advice.

The increase in sectarian attacks we're seeing in and around Baghdad are unsettling. It has led to much debate in both our countries about the nature of the war that is taking place in Iraq. And it is true that Sunni and Shi'a extremists are targeting each other's innocent civilians and engaging in brutal reprisals. It's also true that forces beyond Iraq's borders contribute to this violence. And the Prime Minister put it this way, he said, "The violence is

not an accident or a result of faulty planning. It is a deliberate strategy. It is the direct result of outside extremists teaming up with internal extremists—Al Qaida with the Sunni insurgents and Iran with the Shi'a militia—to foment hatred and to throttle, at birth, the possibility of a non-sectarian democracy." You were right, and I appreciate your comments.

The primary victims of the sectarian violence are the moderate majority of Iraqis—Sunni and Shi'a alike—who want a future of peace. The primary beneficiaries are Sunni and Shi'a extremists, inside and outside of Iraq, who want chaos in that country so they can take control and further their ambitions to dominate the region.

These Sunni and Shi'a extremists have important differences, yet they agree on one thing: The rise of free and democratic societies in the Middle East, where people can practice their faith, choose their leaders, and live together in peace would be a decisive blow to their cause.

And so they're supporting extremists across the region who are working to undermine young democracies. Just think about the Middle East. In Iraq, they support terrorists and death squads who are fomenting sectarian violence in an effort to bring down the elected Government of Prime Minister Maliki. In Lebanon, they're supporting Hizballah, which recently declared its intention to force the collapse of Prime Minister Siniora's democratically elected Parliament and Government. In Afghanistan, they're supporting remnants of the Taliban that are seeking to destabilize President Karzai's Government and regain power. In the Palestinian Territories, they are working to stop moderate leaders like President Abbas from making progress toward the vision of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

In each of these places, radicals and extremists are using terror to stop the spread of freedom. And they do so because they want to spread their ideologies, their

ideologies of hate and impose their rule on this vital part of the world. And should they succeed, history will look back on our time with unforgiving clarity and demand to know, what happened? How come free nations did not act to preserve the peace?

Prime Minister Blair and I understand that we have a responsibility to lead and to support moderates and reformers who work for change across the broader Middle East. We also recognize that meeting this responsibility requires action. We will take concerted efforts to advance the cause of peace in the Middle East. Prime Minister Blair informed me that he will be heading to the Middle East soon to talk to both the Israelis and the Palestinians, and I support that mission. I support the mission because it's important for us to advance the cause of two states living side by side in peace, and helping both parties eliminate the obstacles that prevent an agreement from being reached. And your strong leadership on this issue matters a lot.

We'll support the democratic Government of Prime Minister Maliki as he makes difficult decisions and confronts the forces of terror and extremism that are working hard to tear his country apart.

Britain and America are old allies, and the Prime Minister and I are strong friends. But Britain and America aren't standing together in this war because of friendship. We're standing together because our two nations face an unprecedented threat to civilization. We're standing together to prevent terrorists and extremists from dominating the Middle East. We stand together to prevent extremists from regaining the safe haven they lost in Afghanistan, a safe haven from which they launched attacks that killed thousands of our citizens. We stand together because we understand the only way to secure a lasting peace for our children and grandchildren is to defeat the extremist ideologies and help the ideology of hope, democracy prevail. We know the only way to secure peace for ourselves is to help millions of moms and dads across

the Middle East build what our citizens already have: societies based on liberty that will allow their children to grow up in peace and opportunity.

It's a tough time, and it's a difficult moment for America and Great Britain. And the task before us is daunting. Yet our nations have stood together before in difficult moments. Sixty-five years ago this day, America was jolted out of our isolationism and plunged into a global war that Britain had been fighting for 2 years. In that war, our Nation stood firm. And there were difficult moments during that war, yet the leaders of our two nations never lost faith in the capacity to prevail.

We will stand firm again, in this first war of the 21st century. We will defeat the extremists and the radicals. We will help a young democracy prevail in Iraq. And in so doing, we will secure freedom and peace for millions, including our own citizens.

Mr. Prime Minister, welcome.

Prime Minister Blair. Thank you very much, Mr. President. And thank you, firstly, for stressing again the strength of the relationship between our two countries, which is important for us, but I think it's important for the wider global community as well. Thank you also for the clarity of your vision about the mission that we're engaged in at the moment, which is a struggle between freedom and democracy on the one hand and terrorism and sectarianism on the other. And it's a noble mission, and it's the right mission, and it's important for our world that it succeeds.

And so the question is, how do we make sure that it does, indeed, succeed? And in respect of Iraq, I, like you, welcome the Baker-Hamilton study group. It offers a strong way forward. I think it is important now we concentrate on the elements that are necessary to make sure that we succeed, because the consequences of failure are severe. And I believe this is a mission we have to succeed in and we can succeed in.

And I think there are three elements that we can take forward. The first is to make sure that we are supporting the Maliki Government in making sure that that Government's nonsectarian nature is reflected in the policies of that Government and the way that it conducts itself. I think in respect of governance and security and capability—particularly economic capability—there is much that we are doing, but can do even more in order to make sure that they are supported in the vital work that they do and in the work of reconciliation, in bringing the different parts of Iraq together in order to give effect to the will of the Iraqi people, expressed in their democratic election.

I think, secondly, it's important that all of us who are engaged in this, but particularly those in the region, live up to their responsibilities in supporting the Maliki Government, in ensuring that Iraq is able to proceed in a democratic and non-sectarian way.

And I think that, finally, as you rightly emphasize, it is important that we do everything we can in the wider Middle East to bring about peace between Israel and the Palestinians. This is something that I know you feel deeply and passionately about. You are the first President who committed yourself to the two-state solution, and I believe that by moving this forward, we send a very strong signal not just to the region but to the whole of the world that we are evenhanded and just in the application of our values, that we want to see an Israel confident of its security and a Palestinian people able to live in peace and justice and democracy.

And that brings me back, finally, to the point that I began with, because I think it is the central point. Yes, it is immensely tough at the moment and very challenging, and everybody knows that. But there are only two ways that the Middle East can go. Its people can either be presented with a choice between a secular or a religious dictatorship, which is not a choice that any

free people would ever choose, or alternatively, they can enjoy the same possibilities of democracy that we hold dear in our countries. And this is not a view that we hold—I hold because of idealism alone; it is because I also believe that the only realistic path to security is by ensuring the spread of liberty.

So, Mr. President, thank you again for welcoming me here. And we will work closely with you in the time to come in order to achieve the mission we have set ourselves.

President Bush. Thank you, sir.

Prime Minister Blair. Thank you.

President Bush. We'll answer a couple of questions.

Iraq Study Group Report/Situation in the Middle East

Q. Mr. President and Mr. Prime Minister, neither of you has shown much doubt about your Iraq policies. Do you acknowledge that your approach has failed, as Baker-Hamilton suggests? And are you willing to engage directly with Syria and Iran and pull out most combat forces by early 2008, unless there's unexpected circumstances?

President Bush. The thing I liked about the Baker-Hamilton report is it discussed the way forward in Iraq. And I believe we need a new approach. And that's why I've tasked the Pentagon to analyze the way forward. That's why Prime Minister Blair is here to talk about the way forward, so we can achieve the objective, which is an Iraq which can govern itself, sustain itself, and defend itself and be an ally in the war on terror.

And the Baker-Hamilton report did some very interesting things. First, it shows that Republicans and Democrats can work together to achieve an—to come up with a strategy to achieve an objective, something the American people don't think is possible to happen. In other words, they've seen elections, and they saw all the bitterness and finger-pointing and name-calling and

wonder whether or not we can work together on this important cause. And I believe we can, and the Baker-Hamilton commission showed it's possible for people of good will to sit down at the table and design a way forward.

And so that's why I'm sitting down with the Members of Congress, to say to both Republicans and Democrats, "This is an important cause. It's important for our security. It's important to help lay the foundations for peace, and I want to hear your ideas." And I thought the report did a good job of showing what is possible. The Congress isn't going to accept every recommendation in the report, and neither will the administration, but there's a lot of very important things in the report that we ought to seriously consider.

And as the Prime Minister talked about, there's three aspects to the report. One is, how do we empower the Maliki Government so that the Maliki Government—the elected Government of the Iraqis—can help with the economy, can help secure peace, can do hard work necessary to achieve stability and to achieve the objective?

It talked about the regional—the countries in the region and the responsibilities of the region to help this Iraqi Government. And the idea of having an international group is an interesting idea. We've already got the compact, and I think the Baker-Hamilton report suggests that we broaden the Compact beyond just economic measures.

But one thing is for certain: When people—if people come to the table to discuss Iraq, they need to come understanding their responsibilities to not fund terrorists, to help this young democracy survive, to help with the economics of the country. And if people are not committed, if Syria and Iran is not committed to that concept, then they shouldn't bother to show up.

Thirdly, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is an—is important to have—is important to be solved. I'm committed to a two-state

solution. I believe it is in Israel's interest and the Palestinian people's interest to have two states living side by side for peace. And the Prime Minister shares that goal, and he is willing to take time to go over and help remove obstacles toward achieving that goal.

And there are two notable obstacles. One is the prisoner, and secondly, is for there to be a unity government that recognizes the principles of the Quartet, with which Israel can negotiate. And we want to help.

And so I view this as a very important way forward, with important concepts. And the American people expect us to come up with a new strategy to achieve the objective which I've been talking about and which is laid out in the Baker-Hamilton report.

Prime Minister Blair. Look, I think the analysis of the situation is not really in dispute. The question is, how do we find the right way forward? And what we've got at the moment is something that is at one level very simple to describe but at another level very profound and difficult to deal with, and that is that the outside extremists are linking up with internal extremists, basically to create the circumstances of sectarianism, where it's very, very difficult then for democracy and ordinary institutions to function.

And I think the Baker-Hamilton report allows us to—as the situation has evolved in Iraq—to evolve our strategy in order to meet it in the ways that I've just described. But I think we've got to be very, very clear about this: It will require everybody to face up to their responsibilities—us, of course, because we are principal actors in this, but also the Iraqi Government. They've got to be prepared to make the moves necessary—full governance, full capability, reconciliation, and full help and security—and we will be there to support them.

But then there's responsibilities, as the President was saying a moment or two ago, on the region and the neighbors. And let me come directly to the Iran and Syria

point. The issue for me is not a question of being unwilling to sit down with people or not, but the basis upon which we discuss Iraq has got to be clear, and it's got to be a basis where we are all standing up for the right principles, which are now endorsed in the United Nations resolutions, in respect of Iraq. In other words, you support the democratic elected Government; you do not support sectarians; and you do not support, arm, or finance terrorists.

Now, the very reason we have problems in parts of Iraq—and we know this very well down in the south of Iraq—is that Iran, for example, has been doing that. It's been basically arming, financing, supporting terrorism. So we've got to be clear the basis upon which we take this forward. And as I say, it's got to be on the basis of people accepting their responsibilities.

And finally, in relation to what the President was just saying a moment or two ago on Israel and Palestine, I mean, I think that one thing that is very clear is that the old Middle East had within it the origins of all the problems we see. I mean, this terrorist problem that we faced in the last few years, it didn't originate, I'm afraid, a few years ago. It's been building up over decades. It's come out of a series of states of oppression, of warped ideology based on a perverted view of the faith of Islam. This has been building up for a long period of time, and it has basically come out of the Middle East.

Now my view in the end is that you go back to the origins of this and say, well, how do we resolve it? And the only way we resolve it is by having the right vision and then the practical measures to achieve it.

Now I think the vision is absolutely correct. What we've got to do now—and this is exactly why the President is talking about the way forward—is that we've got to get the right way forward—this is where Baker-Hamilton helped—in order that we have the practical policy that bolsters and gives effect to the vision, because the vision is

the right vision. You leave a Middle East in which the Israel-Palestine issue is not solved, in which there's no moves towards democracy, in which Iraq goes back in its old state, in which the Iranian people have no chance to express themselves, maybe not in the months or 1 year, 2 years, but you'll have the same problem. You know, the reason we are faced with this issue is because in the end, everything that happened in that region erupted, in fact, on the streets of New York. But it—the origins of this went way, way back before that.

And so it is—there's a tendency, I think, sometimes, to see this as a battle between the idealists on the one hand and the realists on the other. In my view, the only modern form of realism is one that has ideals at the center of it.

War on Terror

Q. Mr. President, the Iraq Study Group described the situation in Iraq as grave and deteriorating. You said that the increase in attacks is unsettling. That won't convince many people that you're still in denial about how bad things are in Iraq, and question your sincerity about changing course.

President Bush. It's bad in Iraq. Does that help? [Laughter]

Q. Why did it take others to say it before you've been willing to acknowledge it to the world?

President Bush. In all due respect, I've been saying it a lot. I understand how tough it is, and I've been telling the American people how tough it is, and they know how tough it is. And the fundamental question is, do we have a plan to achieve our objective? Are we willing to change as the enemy has changed? The—and what the Baker-Hamilton study has done is, it shows good ideas as to how to go forward. What our Pentagon is doing is figuring out ways to go forward, all aiming to achieve our objective.

Make no mistake about it, I understand how tough it is, sir. I talk to the families who die. I understand there's sectarian vio-

lence. I also understand that we're hunting down Al Qaida on a regular basis and we're bringing them to justice. I understand how hard our troops are working. I know how brave the men and women who wear the uniform are, and therefore, they'll have the full support of this Government. I understand what long deployments mean to wives and husbands, and mothers and fathers, particularly as we come into a holiday season. I understand. And I have made it abundantly clear how tough it is.

I also believe we're going to succeed. I believe we'll prevail. Not only do I know how important it is to prevail, I believe we will prevail. I understand how hard it is to prevail. But I also want the American people to understand that if we were to fail—and one way to assure failure is just to quit, is not to adjust, and say, it's just not worth it—if we were to fail, that failed policy will come to hurt generations of Americans in the future.

And as I said in my opening statement, I believe we're in an ideological struggle between forces that are reasonable and want to live in peace and radicals and extremists. And when you throw into the mix radical Shi'a and radical Sunni trying to gain power and topple moderate governments, with energy which they could use to blackmail Great Britain or America or anybody else who doesn't kowtow to them, and a nuclear weapon in the hands of a government that is—would be using that nuclear weapon to blackmail to achieve political objectives, historians will look back and say, how come Bush and Blair couldn't see the threat? That's what they'll be asking. And I want to tell you, I see the threat, and I believe it is up to our governments to help lead the forces of moderation to prevail. It's in our interests.

And one of the things that has changed for American foreign policy is a threat overseas can now come home to hurt us. And September the 11th should be a wake-up call for the American people to understand what happens if there is violence and safe

havens in a part of the world. And what happens is, people can die here at home.

And so no, I appreciate your question. I appreciate—as you can tell, I feel strongly about making sure you understand that I understand it's tough. But I want you to know, sir, that I believe we'll prevail. I know we have to adjust to prevail, but I wouldn't have our troops in harm's way if I didn't believe that, one, it was important, and two, we'll succeed. Thank you.

Diplomatic Efforts in the Middle East

Q. Prime Minister, if I may, briefly— isn't what the—

Prime Minister Blair. You're not going to do a followup, are you? [Laughter]

Q. No, no, forgive me. I just wanted to ask you about your Middle East mission, if I may. Given your trip to the Middle East, isn't the truth of what the Arab-Israeli solution—sorry, isn't the truth of what the Arab-Israeli problem requires is not, however hard you try, another visit by a British Prime Minister, but the genuine commitment—and not merely in words—of an American administration that's serious about doing something about it?

Prime Minister Blair. Well, I believe that we have that commitment. And I mean, you're right in this sense, there would be no point in me going unless it was part of a mission that was supported fully by our American allies. But it is—we agree—the vision—I mean, the one thing that I find very frustrating about the situation, Israel-Palestine, is that there is actually an agreement as to the solution we want to see, which is a two-state solution. And really, everybody is agreed to that. So the question is, how do you get there?

And there are critical obstacles that stand in the way of that that require detailed attention and management, and it's not merely myself who's going to be engaged in this, of course, but as you know, the Secretary of State has been very closely involved in this. She's been visiting the re-

gion recently, and I know is, again, fully committed to it.

I think what is interesting from what you have from this today is an acceptance and, indeed, a clear belief that you look at these issues together. There is a kind of whole vision about how we need to proceed that links what happens inside Iraq with what happens outside Iraq. And again, I think that the Baker-Hamilton report put this very simply and very clearly.

And you know, there is no way that you ever succeed in these things unless you just carry on trying, and that's what we will do. And one of the things I learned in all the long years that you followed me in relation to Northern Ireland is that you just—you don't accept that you ever give up. You just carry on doing it. And I am sure that it is possible to resolve this, and I also do believe that if we do, then it would send a signal of massive symbolic power across the world.

President Bush. Steve [Steve Holland, Reuters].

War on Terror Strategy

Q. Thank you, sir. You mentioned Iran and Syria as part of this regional effort. Are you willing to engage with them directly as the report recommends? And back to the issue of the troops, is it possible to get them out of Iraq by early 2008, as the report talks about? And when do you hope to have this report? Sorry to—

President Bush. How many questions you got, Steve?

Q. Sorry about that. [Laughter]

President Bush. You mean, when do I hope to announce the strategy, is that what you're talking about?

Q. Yes, sir.

President Bush. After I get the reports. And Baker-Hamilton is a really important part of our considerations. But we want to make sure the military gets their point of view in. After all, a lot of what we're doing is a military operation. I want to make sure the State Department is able

to help us analyze the strategy to make sure that we've got the right political emphasis, not only inside Iraq but outside Iraq.

I appreciated the Prime Minister's answer to this lad—we call them lads, in Great Britain—lad's question, is that—[laughter].

Prime Minister Blair. You've made a friend, I think, there. [Laughter] It's a long time since anyone's called him that, yes. [Laughter]

President Bush. You got to understand—well—

Q. He calls me a number of other things.

President Bush. Our Secretary of State is very much engaged in this issue. She works hard on the issue. And as much as we'd like to impose the settlement, it's important for you to understand, sir, that the Israelis and the Palestinians must accept responsibility and must sign off on an agreement. It's kind of easy to sit back and say, okay, we're going to impose this on them. We can help, and we will help.

So, Steve, that's—we're spending a lot—I know, I'm heading back. We're spending a lot of time considering the new course, because the decisions that we make affect lives. They affect the lives of our soldiers; they affect the lives of the Iraqi people. But one thing is central to this new course, and that is, the Iraqi Government must be given more responsibility so they can prove to their people and to their allies that they're capable of making hard decisions necessary for their young democracy to move forward.

Second part of your long question?

Iran/Syria

Q. Well, are you willing to engage direct talks with—

President Bush. Oh, Iran and Syria.

Q. —just a regional effort—

President Bush. No, no, I understand. Steve, let me talk about engaging Iran. We have made it clear to the Iranians that there is a possible change in U.S. policy,

a policy that's been in place for 27 years, and that is that if they would like to engage the United States that they've got to verifiably suspend their enrichment program. We've made our choice. Iran now has an opportunity to make its choice. I would hope they would make the choice that most of the free world wants them to make, which is, there is no need to have a weapons program; there is no need to isolate your people; there's no need to continue this obstinance, when it comes to your stated desires to have a nuclear weapon. It's not in your interest to do so.

And should they agree to verifiably suspend their enrichment, the United States will be at the table with our partners.

It's really interesting to talk about conversations with countries, which is fine; I can understand why people speculate about it, but there should be no mistake in anybody's mind, these countries understand our position. They know what's expected of them.

There is—if we were to have a conversation, it would be this one, to Syria: Stop destabilizing the Siniora Government. We believe that the Siniora Government should be supported, not weakened. Stop allowing money and arms to cross your border into Iraq. Don't provide safe haven for terrorist groups. We've made that position very clear.

And the truth of the matter is, is that these countries have now got the choice to make. If they want to sit down at the table with the United States, it's easy—just make some decisions that will lead to peace, not to conflict.

Is that the third part of your question? You've got to stop these long questions, Steven. Steven.

U.S. Troop Levels in Iraq/War on Terror

Q. Combat troops out by early 2008, is that possible—

President Bush. One of the things the report did mention, and I think you've said it in your comment, that if conditions so

allow—and we want our combat troops out as quick as possible. We want the Iraqis taking the fight. But it's very important to be—as we design programs, to be flexible and realistic. And as the report said—I don't got the exact words, but it was along the lines that, you know, “depending upon conditions,” I believe is what the qualifier was. And I thought that made a lot of sense. I've always said we'd like our troops out as fast as possible. I think that's an important goal.

On the other hand, our commanders will be making recommendations based upon whether or not we're achieving our stated objective. And the objective, I repeat, is a government which can sustain, govern, and defend itself—free Government of Iraq that can do that—and will be an ally in this movement—against this movement that is threatening peace and stability. And it's real.

I like to remind people, it's akin to the cold war in many ways. There's an ideological clash going on. And the question is, will we have the resolve and the confidence in liberty to prevail? That's really the fundamental question facing—it's not going to face this Government or this Government because we made up our mind. We've made that part clear. But it will face future governments. There will be future opportunities for people to say, “Well, it's not worth it; let's just retreat.” I would strongly advise a government not to accept that position because of the dangers inherent with isolationism and retreat.

Situation in the Middle East

Q. I'll try to be succinct. Mr. President, 2 years ago, you said that you were ready to expend political capital on the Israel-Palestinian situation. With hindsight, do you think you've fulfilled that intention? How closely do you see a linkage between what happens in Israel-Palestine and a settlement in Iraq, achieving your goals?

And Prime Minister, given that you were so recently in the Middle East and the

situation hasn't exactly improved since then, is there anything specific you're hoping to achieve next week when you go back?

President Bush. Want me to start? I'm getting older, so you're going to have to repeat the second part of your question. [Laughter] Let me answer the first part. What's important is for people to accept the goal of two states living side by side for peace. And what has changed in the Middle East is that Israel and Palestine—at least the current leadership of both countries, or both—one entity and one country—accept that goal. That's important.

To that end, the previous Prime Minister made a decision to unilaterally withdraw from Gaza, which I felt was a good decision, which would expedite the potential arrival of a state. And so to answer your question, yes, we're spending a lot of capital getting people headed in the same direction, which if you look at the history of the Middle East, is a change.

Secondly, one of the reasons why there hasn't been instant success is because radicals and extremists are trying to stop the advance of a Palestinian state. Why? Because democracy is a defeat for them. That's what I strongly believe. I find it interesting that when Prime Minister Olmert reaches out to Palestinians to discuss a way forward on the two-state solution, Hizballah attacks Israel. Why? Because radicals and extremists can't stand the thought of a democracy. And one of the great ironies is that people in the Middle East are working hard to prevent people in the Middle East from realizing the blessings of a free society in a democracy.

And so no question, progress has been spotty. But it's important for people to understand, one of the reasons why is, because radicals are trying to prevent it, and they're willing to kill innocent people to prevent progress. Now, our goal is to help the Abbas Government strengthen its security forces, and we're doing that. Our goal is to help the Abbas Government form a government that adheres to the principles

of the Quartet. We can't abandon the principles of the Quartet just because it may sound easy. We can't do that. When nations lay out principles, you've got to adhere to those principles, just like when we laid out a vision, you adhere to that vision.

And so the Prime Minister's visit, like Condi's visit recently to the Middle East, are all aiming to help countries remove obstacles necessary to achieve the vision. And it's hard work, but it's necessary work. And so I do believe there is a—I know there's a change of attitude. And now the fundamental question is, can we help the moderates prevail? And make no mistake about it, radicals and extremists will kill in order to stop the progress. And that's what's difficult. But it should be a signal to those of us who have got the comfort of liberty to understand the consequences of this ideological struggle we're fighting. One of the consequences is the denial of a Palestinian state.

This is ironic, isn't it? I think it is, and it's sad.

Prime Minister Blair. I mean, I think, first of all, it's important to understand how much has begun—how much work there's been. I mean, I know I've had many, many meetings on this issue over the past few months. I know Secretary Rice has been immensely active on it over these past months as well. Now, some of that is visible and out there at press conferences and meetings, and a lot of it is behind the scenes.

But in essence, what we've got to do is to try to resolve two issues. First of all, we need to get the release of Corporal Shalit, which, as Prime Minister Olmert made clear the other day, would then allow the release of many Palestinian prisoners as well. And this is obviously a very important issue.

But then, secondly, and this is, I think, really—one of the core questions is, we are prepared to release the money to the Palestinian Authority. We are prepared to take the peace process forward and get into

a process of negotiation. But we need a government on both sides that is committed to the basic principles of that negotiation. And at the present time, we are not able to achieve a national unity government on the Palestinian side. And the reason for that is that we are saying, not as a matter of dogma at all, but you can't have a government that everyone can deal with and you can then negotiate a peace between Israel and Palestine, unless it's on the basis that everyone accepts the other's right to exist. So that's the difficulty. It's not a kind of technical point; it's absolutely at the heart of it.

Now, what we have got to do is to find either a way of unlocking the problem of forming that national unity government, on the principles laid down by the United Nations as well as the rest of the Quartet, or alternatively, a different way forward, but whatever way forward will have to be on the basis you get an empowered Palestinian Government with whom everyone can negotiate and deal with.

Now, you know, again, it's a very, very obvious thing. It's not just for the Israelis and the Palestinians but also for the whole of the region. You know, you can't negotiate this unless everyone accepts the basic principles of the negotiation. But if people were to do that—and after all, we're only asking people to accept the position that the United Nations and, really, the whole of the international community—you could move this forward quickly. I mean, I don't think there's any doubt at all that if you could get an empowered Palestinian Government able to negotiate, Israel has made it clear it is prepared to negotiate.

I'm not saying there aren't very tricky issues. There are—things like Jerusalem, the right of return, which are very, very difficult. But actually, it's not beyond our wit to put it together. We could put it together. But you need to get these initial steps taken.

Now, what I'm wont to do when I go out there is just explore what is the way

that we get that ability to get the negotiation underway, trying to work round these obstacles. And it's something—we were talking about Iran and Syria moments ago; it's something all of those countries could help with if they wanted to help with it. So I kind of feel one thing that is important is that everyone understands that there's no shortage of willingness, energy, commitment on our side.

And believe me, I've talked about this with the President many, many times, and I don't believe there's any shortage of those qualities on his part at all. But we need to get this—we need to get the door unlocked because it's kind of barred at the moment. It needs to be opened. And that's the task, I think, for the next period.

President Bush. Thank you. L.A. Times man, Jim [Jim Gerstenzang].

Iraq Study Group Report

Q. Mr. President, you have said that you have the Baker-Hamilton report; you also have the—you're waiting to hear from the Pentagon; you're waiting to hear from the State Department. This report was prepared by a bipartisan group, the only one you'll get. Secretary Baker has a special relationship with the family. Should this report not get extra consideration? Does it not carry more weight than any of the others?

President Bush. That's an interesting question. It's certainly an important part of our deliberations, and it was certainly an important part of our discussions this morning. Some reports are issued and just gather dust. And truth of the matter is, a lot of reports in Washington are never read by anybody.

To show you how important this one is, I read it, and our guest read it. The Prime Minister read a report prepared by a commission. And this is important. And there are some—I don't think Jim Baker and Lee Hamilton expect us to accept every recommendation. I expect them—I think—I know they expect us to consider every rec-

ommendation, Jim, that we ought to pay close attention to what they advise. And I told them yesterday at our meeting that we would pay close attention and would seriously consider every recommendation. We've discussed some of their recommendations here at this press conference. And we are—we will spend a lot of time on it.

And I—and so you ask its relative importance. I'd call it a very important report and a very important part of our working to a new approach, a new way forward in Iraq.

And I can't—I really do thank those citizens for taking time out of busy lives to spend time helping us look at different options. These are distinguished souls. They got plenty to do. They're busy people, and yet they took 9 months out. And they talked to a lot of people; they went to Iraq; they thought about it a lot. And it was a very considerate, important report. And I will take their recommendations very seriously.

War on Terror Strategy

Q. Mr. President, the Iraq Study Group said that leaders must be candid and forthright with people. So let me test that. Are you capable of admitting your failures in the past, and perhaps much more importantly, are you capable of changing course, perhaps in the next few weeks?

President Bush. I think you're probably going to have to pay attention to my speech coming up here when I get all the recommendations in, and you can answer that question yourself. I do know that we have not succeeded as fast as we wanted to succeed. I do understand that progress is not as rapid as I had hoped. And therefore, it makes sense to analyze the situation and to devise a set of tactics and strategies to achieve the objective that I have stated.

And so if the present situation needs to be changed, it follows that we'll change it if we want to succeed. What's really interesting is, the battle has changed in Iraq

from the rejectionists and former Ba'athists and definitely foreign fighters who have entered the country that were trying to destabilize the new Government to one that Mr. Zarqawi stated clearly—he said, “Look, let’s kill Shi’a in order to create enough chaos and confusion and doubt of the Government, and set off a sectarian battle.” And he succeeded in that extent. He didn’t succeed at avoiding us, but he did succeed at starting off sectarian strife. And now the fundamental question is, what strategy is necessary to deal with this type of violence?

We’ll continue after Al Qaida. Al Qaida will not have safe haven in Iraq. And that’s important for the American people to know. We’ve got special operators. We’ve got better intelligence. And there is—Al Qaida is effective at these spectacular bombings, and we’ll chase them down, and we are, along with the Iraqis. The strategy now is how to make sure that we’ve got the security situation in place such that the Iraqi Government is capable of dealing with the sectarian violence, as well as the political and economic strategies as well.

So yes, I think you’ll see something differently, because it’s a practical answer to a situation on the ground that’s not the way we’d like it. You wanted frankness; I thought we would succeed quicker than we did, and I am disappointed by the pace of success.

Prime Minister Blair. I mean, look, there isn’t any—as I said a moment or two ago, there isn’t any doubt about how tough this is. It’s hugely challenging. But what the report did not say is that we should just get out and leave it. What it did say is that it’s immensely important that we succeed.

Now, the question is, therefore, how do we do it? And in that regard, I think the report is practical, it’s clear, and it offers also the way of bringing people together.

The other thing that we want to do, because this is part of succeeding in this mission, is actually to make people understand that this is something where you’ve got to

try and bring people together around a set of common objectives and a practical set of methods to achieve those objectives.

And, you know, the issues that the report raises—I mean, these aren’t issues that, obviously, no one has ever thought of; these aren’t issues that haven’t been part of the continual discussion and debate and iteration within the coalition and, indeed, between us and the Iraqi Government. But those essential elements—we want to make sure, in the light of the changing situation that there is there, that, one, we have the Iraqi Government able to operate effectively, but in a nonsectarian way, because that’s what we began with. Secondly, that we make sure that everyone in the region is supporting that. And thirdly, that we set this within the context of a broader vision for the Middle East, not least in respect of Israel and Palestine.

Now, in respect of the elements of that strategy, this report gives us a basis on which we can move forward, but we’ve obviously then got to look at the practical measures that are necessary in order to give effect to those elements. And that’s what we’ll do. And I think that, you know, the one thing that no one who is dealing with this on a day-to-day basis has any doubt about is how tough it is. But the question is, how we make sure that we overcome those tough conditions and succeed, because the need to succeed is so huge.

British Armed Forces in Iraq and Afghanistan

Q. Prime Minister, just a brief supplementary—sorry, I didn’t get to ask you the question. You promised some time—I’m sorry.

President Bush. Look, I agree; this is a total violation of—[laughter]. Our press corps is calling you down, man. I mean, there you are—no, go ahead. [Laughter]

Q. You’re encouraging it.

President Bush. I’m not encouraging it. He’s not a member of the American press—it’s the Prime Minister. [Laughter]

Prime Minister Blair. He's my guy. [Laughter]

Q. Only because you cut me off, Mr. President—

President Bush. Okay. [Laughter]

Press. Ooh! [Laughter]

Q. Prime Minister, you promised the British military whatever it takes to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the former head of the British Army says the British military is not being funded properly for the job it's being asked to do. Do you accept that?

Prime Minister Blair. We get from our military advice as to what they need, and we do our level best to meet it. I mean, we'll—I haven't actually read Mike Jackson's comments. I think it's Mike's speech you're talking about. And let me tell you, he's someone I have enormous amount of respect for and did a fantastic job when he was chief of our staff.

But in relation to this, we've worked closely with the military the whole time. It's important we carry on doing it. And I simply make the point that in the last few years, and not least yesterday in the pre-budget report of the chancellor, we gave another significant increase in funding. But it's important we do this. I mean this is a mission in which it is—because it's

important that we succeed, it's important that we equip our armed forces properly. But I've got nothing—if you'll forgive me, I've not got anything to comment on in detail until I've actually read the speech that he made. Not that—I'm not saying you wouldn't give me a fair resume of it. [Laughter]

President Bush. Thank you, buddy.

Prime Minister Blair. Okay.

President Bush. Good job. Thank you.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 11:05 a.m. in Room 450 of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, the President referred to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki of Iraq; Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim, chairman, Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution of Iraq; Prime Minister Fuad Siniora of Lebanon; President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan; President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority; Cpl. Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier captured and held captive by militants in Gaza since June 25; and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel. Prime Minister Blair referred to former Chief of the General Staff Michael Jackson of the United Kingdom.

Remarks on Lighting the National Christmas Tree *December 7, 2006*

Thank you all very much. Laura and I are pleased to welcome you to the Christmas Pageant of Peace. Christmas is a season of glad tidings and a time when our thoughts turn to the source of joy and hope born in a humble manger 2000 years ago. And tonight we gather to observe one of the great traditions of our Nation's Capital, the lighting of the National Christmas Tree.

I'm really glad Santa made it. [Laughter] I'm glad he could find a place to park.

[Laughter] And I'm glad you all joined us tonight.

I want to thank Vin for his leadership of the National Park Foundation. I thank Deputy Secretary of the Interior Lynn Scarlett for joining us. I am pleased to be here with members of my Cabinet; Members of the Congress; Mary Bomar, who is the Director of the National Park Service; Joe Lawler, Regional Director of the National Capital Region, National Park